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Do Ends Justify Means? Feminist Economics Perspectives on the Business Case for Gender Equality in the UK Labour Market

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Abstract: This paper intends to explore a feminist economics perspective on business case arguments for gender equality in the UK labour market, where there are significant inequalities between men and women. Policy discourse on gender equality has moved from one which emphasises 'equal opportunities' and notions of fairness and equal treatment to one which focuses on increasing economic efficiency in the wider economy and viewing female employees as a competitive advantage for individual firms. Developments in the policy discourse of gender equality in the labour market have been heavily influenced by mainstream, neoclassical economics. An example of this is the current UK government aim to encourage private sector employers to take action on gender equality voluntarily on the basis of 'business case' arguments. The business case itself has been critiqued by many authors but has yet to be considered from an explicitly feminist economics perspective. Feminist economics is argued to be a more appropriate paradigm for the consideration of gender inequalities.

Keywords: Feminist economics, business case, gender equality, labour market

Introduction

> The only reason, the only excuse, for the study of economic theory is to make this world a better place in which to live
>
> Wesley Clair Mitchell *apud* Ramstad 1993:173

Mitchell refers to the importance of the link between theories of the economy and economic policy; between the 'thinking' of academic economics and the 'doing' of policy. It is argued that the study of theory should be practiced only for the development of appropriate policy responses to economic problems. A current problem facing the UK economy is the persistence of inequalities between men and women in the paid labour market. For the feminist economist, the extent to which mainstream academic economics is able to inform appropriate policy responses to this problem is questioned.

Currently, labour market policies in the UK are heavily influenced by the dominant perspective in economics; the neoclassical school, also referred to as orthodox or mainstream economics. With respect to the organisation of human economic activity, mainstream economics takes the view that the market is the key organiser and source of economic welfare. Within the market, economic decisions are taken by free, rational agents acting purely out of their own self-interest. Mainstream economics models its research processes on those of the natural sciences; that is, largely positivist deductive methods are used to arrive at empirical data that is 'objective' and/or 'neutral'.

The neoclassical paradigm is so entrenched that it is more often than not referred to simply as 'economics' - the neoclassical paradigm *defines* economic inquiry. Potential critics therefore find it difficult to even enter the arena in which they could express a different point of view. However, there are heterodox or 'critical' perspectives on the economy that offer more inclusive ways of thinking about the economy and the formulation of appropriate policy responses to economic problems. One such critical perspective is that of feminist economics. Feminist economics highlights the androcentric bias of mainstream economics hence it is argued to be an appropriate analytical framework within which to analyse current policy approaches to promoting gender equality in the labour market. This paper intends to explore a feminist economics perspective on business case arguments for gender equality in the UK labour market that are currently being used to influence the demand side of the labour market. The argument is made that mainstream, neoclassical conceptions of the labour market, on which current policy response to gender inequalities are heavily based, do not adequately, or even accurately, depict the gender dynamics of employment. It is therefore argued that feminist economics, in drawing attention to gender relations in the economy, the andocentric biases of mainstream economics and its devaluation of unpaid labour, is a more appropriate paradigm for the development of effective policy for gender equality. The perspective adopted in this paper in based mainly on the work of two of the most influential feminist economists Nelson (1996, 2006) and Waring (1988).

Feminist Economics

Feminist economists "accept neither the priority of the 'economic' as universal nor the market as the sole provisioning domain" (Jennings 1993: 119). A feminist economics perspective maintains that even in markets, many activities (saving, speculation and corporate finance for example) make little contribution to economic 'provisioning' (*ibid.*)

and, as a whole, markets are of less economic significance than the unpaid labour that women perform in the household. Feminist economics also draws attention to gender inequality and how gender inequality is related to other social inequalities such as those stemming from race and class (Mayhew 1999). In pursuing 'value-free' science, neoclassical doctrine undermines consideration of social justice issues, as these require explicitly normative consideration. Seiz (1992) has described the parallels between feminist perspectives in economics to other critiques of the philosophy of science:

> It [feminist epistemology] shares the post-Kuhnian emphasis on the social nature of scientific activity and it confronts the vexing and now familiar conflicts between objectivism and relativism, but its focus on the 'genderedness' of scientific work gives its critique unique elements (Seiz 1992: 274).

Data arrived at through positivist scientific methods are viewed as superior to the conclusions drawn from research containing a normative or 'contextual' element (Harding 1995) or any overt attempt to change the economic phenomena being studied. This is antithetical to a feminist approach which actively seeks to end the unequal status of women in society and the economy. As Nentwich puts it "the objective of feminist theory is not only to explain the *status quo* of gender relations but to also gain knowledge on how to change them" (Nentwich 2006: 500).

For the feminist economist, the same distinctions can be made between positive and normative inquiry as can be made between the cultural distinctions of gender which are hierarchical; 'good' and 'bad'; that which is masculine is universal and necessary and that which is feminine is marginalised and undesirable. Nelson (1996) has discussed these polarisations in economics as 'dualisms'; a dichotomy between aspects of economics that are regarded as the 'core' and those that are regarded as the 'margin' (Nelson 1996). She has further divided core and margin dualism into 'domains', 'methods', 'key assumptions' and 'gender/sex associations'. The core domain is the public sphere and 'efficiency'; core methods including rigorousness, objectivity and detachment underpinned by assumptions of self-interest, autonomy and rationality (*ibid.*). The core is therefore culturally associated with masculinity and/or 'maleness'. The marginal (or inferior) gender association in economic is the feminine and/or female.

Nelson has recently extended her observation of dualisms in her recent book, *Economics for Humans* (Nelson 2006). In this work, she deconstructs the popular notion that the economy is a machine and that the self-interest of private enterprise is the necessary fuel that drives it. The immutable separation of economics from ethics is expressed as the familiar Cartesian dualism of body and soul.

> While the machine organises provisioning for our bodies, it is itself soulless and inhuman, according to this belief. Ethical questions, on the other hand, concern the appropriate respect and care for other creatures that we - as living, social and soulful beings – should demonstrate. Since machines are incapable of morality, thinking about economies as machines puts commerce firmly outside the ethical realm (Nelson 2006: 2).

Crucially, both pro-market and anti-corporate lobbies buy in to this belief which means that there is a consensus that any attempts to impose ethical constraints on capitalist accumulation are useless; "there can be no ethical mucking-around with the fundamental 'drives' of a monetized, corporatized, globalized market-reliant economy" (*ibid.*: 3).

The separation of the economic 'body' from the ethical 'soul' is itself a highly gendered notion. Where the machine is culturally recognisable as a masculine entity, as it is detached, autonomous and driven by self-interest, the opposite realm of concern for others and social connectedness is culturally coded as feminine. In characterising the economy and ethics as polar opposites (with economy in the dominant, masculine, role), the business community is effectively denied the capacity to behave ethically and/or be actively involved in alleviating social and economic problems. This could be thought of as the negative consequences of the 'efficiency' versus 'equity' dualism as it plays out in the real world of modern corporate capitalism. Characterising individual firms in this way is self-fulfilling as there are little or no expectations that firms have the will to behave ethically.

Another hierarchical dualism is the conventional economic distinction between productive and 'unproductive' work (see Waring 1988 and 2003, UNDP 1995 and Beneria 1999). Waring (1988) analyses the mainstream economic definition of the terms such as 'work', 'labour' and 'economic activity' to show how national accounting systems, underpinned by the discipline of mainstream economics, renders invisible the unpaid work largely performed by women in the household. These words are used interchangeably in mainstream economics; they all imply a market exchange of labour for wages and are thus counted as productive (*i.e.* contribute to GDP). Activities that are performed within the household or for subsistence and not market exchanges are considered to be 'unproductive' (*i. e.* do *not* contribute to GDP). This is reinforced by the neoclassical model of labour supply where time spent not engaging in paid labour is assumed to be time spent 'at leisure' (wages are assumed to compensate for the 'disutility' of paid work). Where women work without wages in the household, taking care of their children for example, by the mainstream definition, they are 'at leisure' because there is no monetary transaction involved. This leads to a narrow definition of the labour force which excludes “the marginally employed, the would-be employed, and certainly not those who work in the informal sectors or who work as housewives” (Waring 1988: 27).

Beneria (1999) and Waring (2003) have traced the attempts that have been made to measure unpaid work in national accounting systems in recent years. Beneria (1999) concludes that “still there is resistance to the measuring of work and production of goods and services that sustain and enhance human well-being” (Beneria 1999: 306), underpinned by the societal norms and value systems of neoliberal market economies. She also notes that unpaid work, while largely performed by women is not evenly distributed amongst women and that the burden of unpaid labour is likely to be fall heavier on poorer households where the more affluent are able to access market based substitutes for domestic labour (*ibid.*). It could be argued that this difference would be apparent both *within* and *between* economies, albeit in the context of globalisation and associated extension of the market and ‘economic rationality’ (Beneria 2003).

Statistics show that in the UK it is still women who perform the majority of unpaid domestic labour, even where both partners are engaged in full time paid labour (Short 2000). Clearly, unpaid work in the household has a productive value in that children are cared for, dishes are cleaned, meals are prepared etc. therefore discounting this activity is not just inaccurate but also has negative consequences for women’s socio-economic status. According to Newland “[work] is still the primary means by which people establish a claim to a share of production. To be without work is to place that claim in jeopardy” (Newland 1979 *apud* Waring 1988: 26). In characterising those whose work takes place in the private, household sphere (as opposed to in the public market domain), mainstream economics devalues women’s true productive input to the economy, broadly, and more accurately, defined. The United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Report estimated that in 1995 the global value of unpaid work, if measured in terms of prevailing wage rates, was $16 trillion – about 70% more than global output estimates for the year of $23 trillion – $11 trillion of which was the “non-marketised, ‘invisible’ contribution of women” (UNDP 1995: 97). Furthermore, economics models that do not reflect the value of non-marketised work will result in policies that reinforce this devaluation, not least by characterising those who work unpaid in the household as ‘economically inactive’.

Feminist economics draws attention to the androcentric nature of mainstream economics, the self-fulfilling nature of the belief that the capitalist machine in incapable of ethical actions and the invisibility of unpaid work in the value system of mainstream economics and policy making. This extends to employment decisions and ethical considerations of gender equality in the labour market. The following section outlines neoclassical and feminist attempts to explain women's unequal labour market position.

Explaining Gender Inequality in the Labour Market

It is evident that women in the UK are disadvantaged in the paid labour market. First of all, men are more likely to be employed than women. In 2008 79% of working age men and 70% of working age women were in formal employment (ONS 2008: 5). For women, dependent children have the biggest impact on their employment rates; of working age women with children aged under five, 57% were in employment in 2008 (*ibid.*: 6). Almost half of women's jobs are part-time compared with around one in six of men's (*ibid.*: 5). In the UK, statistics also indicate that occupations are horizontally and vertically segregated where men are 10 times more likely than women to be employed in skilled trades and are also more likely to be managers and senior officials, even in female dominated occupations such as nursing (*ibid.*). Occupational segregation occurs where certain occupations or industries are culturally viewed as being more appropriate for men or for women based on accepted ideas about the innate capabilities of either sex; *e.g.* the notion that women are inherently more adept at childcare than construction or that men make better leaders. Subsequently, the stereotyping of certain jobs and industries as 'for men' or 'for women' means that women are concentrated in low paid, low status jobs as the jobs that women do (such as caring) are systematically devalued in the market economy (Perrons 2005). Occupational segregation, part time work and the devaluation of women's jobs contribute to the pay gap which, in the UK, is currently 22.6% (WWC 2009). Progress on the closing the UK's gender pay gap appears to be stalling (*ibid.*). Therefore, there is a clear need for effective policies to promote gender equality in the labour market. It is argued that much of the inefficacy of current initiatives is owed to the inadequacies and inaccuracies of the mainstream economics that underpins policy development. Mainstream theoretical attempts to explain the pervasiveness of women's unequal position in the labour market and subsequent earnings differentials can be summarised as the human capital approach. Feminist economics has criticised the human capital school and emphasised more gender aware approaches to explaining women's inequality in the labour market.

The human capital school (see Becker 1964), as the 'labour economics' branch of neoclassical economics, starts from the assumption that all workers and employers are 'rational' and similarly, that the market for labour can be views as any other 'efficient', product market. Income inequality is explained as a consequence of the differences between individual workers in terms of education, training and experience. It is also assumed that for each level of education and/or experiential attainment, there is a related earnings stream and that individuals endeavour to maximise this income throughout their working life; initially investing in 'human capital' to reap the benefits at a later date. Crucially, the theory asserts *causal* relationships between education and work skills, between skills and productivity and between productivity and earnings. According to the human capital perspective, women earn less in the labour market due to lower endowments of human capital. This situation is due to lower initial investment in education as well as broken patterns of experience within the labour market due to pregnancy, child rearing and other household responsibilities. Hence, women as a group are paid less than men because they are less productive. The view that women, as free rational agents, 'choose' lower paid occupations is entrenched within the mainstream labour economics perspective (see for example Hakim 2000; Polachek 2003). It is accepted that women are willing to trade earnings for expediency in terms of the flexibilities and overall compatibility of low paid work with their domestic responsibilities; how work life and family life can be 'reconciled'. As Peterson puts it "women's inferior status is no one's problem but their own. Women are not underpaid; they have simply chosen to work in low paying jobs" (Peterson 2003: 278). This view is underpinned by the assumption that female earnings are supplementary to those of a male partner or husband popularly known as the 'male breadwinner' model.

Feminist economists (*e.g.* Folbre and Hartmann 1988; Bergmann 1989) have noted that the rationalisation of women's disadvantage in the labour market stems from the neoclassical portrayal of human behaviour and 'rational' choice. 'Gender aware' theories emphasise non-economic variables which the mainstream economic perspective does not adequately or even accurately consider. Women's disadvantaged position in the labour market is seen as a reflection of women's subjugation within patriarchal society as a whole. Similarly gender theories draw attention to "how closely the characteristics of female occupations mirror the common stereotypes of women and their supposed abilities" (Anker 1997: 6) and are not just an extension of their domestic role. Hence, for example, the assumption that women are better at caring than men and/or they have less physical strength than men.

Women's access to the labour market has also been a key consideration of feminists researching welfare states, or more specifically, welfare state regimes (see for example Lewis, 1992 and 1997, Sainsbury 1999 and Walby 2004). Feminist critique of mainstream welfare typologies argues that 'decommodification' (Esping-Andersen 1990), as a key dimension of the demarcation of welfare regimes and defined as "the extent to which social rights eliminate dependence on the labour market" (Gornick 1999: 210), does not adequately apply to women needs or circumstances (see for example Orloff 1993).

Alternative approaches include Lewis' (1997) analysis of 'caring regimes'. Lewis (1997) argues that rather than analysing the extent to which individual could be described as decommodified, variations in the valuation of unpaid work, and how it is shared between men and women, are of more importance when comparing welfare states. This echoes the feminist economics critique of national accounting systems and highlights the interdependence of macroeconomics, approaches to welfare and employment policy in shaping labour market outcomes for women and men.

In the UK, a liberal welfare state, policy approaches to gender inequality in the labour market have been heavily influenced by mainstream economics (as have many other policy areas). Unequal labour market outcomes between men and women have been viewed as either the product of women's free choices or a lack of women's human capital formation or a combination of both of these factors. Policy prescriptions are therefore supply side, aimed at women themselves (human capital investment, availability of flexible working, more market based childcare) with legislation in place to ensure that employers cannot legally discriminate against either gender.

Recent attempts to influence the demand side of the labour market to tackle gender inequality in employment have made use of a 'business case' for equality, appealing to the self-interest of individual employers to improve labour market outcomes for women. These supply side policy responses, underpinned by human capital theory, have already been critiqued from a feminist economics perspective. However, market based policy approaches to influence the demand side of the labour market (individual employers) have yet to be fully explored within a feminist economics framework. It is argued that these policy approaches deserve attention from feminist economics as a more appropriate paradigm in which to consider gender equality in the paid labour market.

Policy Approaches to Inequality: From Social Justice to 'Business Case'

A full discussion of the dynamics of equality legislation and policy in the UK is beyond the scope of this paper but a brief retrospective is necessary to fully explore current approaches. In the 1970s, anti-discrimination campaigns based on ideas of individual equality and citizenship rights called for better socio-economic opportunities for women. This resulted in legislation which treated social inequalities as the product of "the discriminatory actions of one individual against another" (Webb: 16). The onus of proof was on the individual who claimed to be discriminated against. Employers therefore had only to *react* to claims of discrimination under the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 or the Equal Pay Act of 1970. In the late 1970s and early 80s the concept of 'equal opportunities' (EO) began to emerge (initially in the public sector). EO has been described as "a 'technical' formula with a set of prescriptions for eliminating discrimination for employment decisions" (*ibid.*). The overarching objective was to ensure that women were treated the same as men. Gender inequalities where they did occur could be viewed simply as the result of unequal merit, as in human capital theory. Unequal outcomes are justified as simply reflecting the differing human capital endowments of men and women and/or their different preferences for paid work (as opposed to domestic work) as free rational economics agents. However, where EO is incompatible with political and economic liberalism is where it emphasises the achievement of equality by means of bureaucratic control. EO was therefore disparaged in the UK as policy moved towards new right ideology informed by mainstream economics. With respect to the labour market, deregulation, 'flexibility' and the rigorous application of market principles came to the fore. By the end of the 1980s equal opportunities with respect to gender focussed much more on the labour market and facilitating the use of women as employees as a resource to meet government's economic objectives (*ibid.*: 161).

At roughly the same time, the emerging academic discipline of Human Resource Management (HRM) and the business community alike began to discuss 'managing diversity' (or often 'equality and diversity') as a response to the possible effects of incoming changes in the demographic composition of the workforce. These changes meant that young white males would become the minority of new labour market entrants. 'Managing diversity' encompasses a few definitions but can be summarised as "valuing everyone as individuals – as employees, customers and clients (Anderson and Metcalf 2003: vii). Much of the research has focused on social or demographic diversity where it has been argued that increasing the gender diversity of the workforce helps firms compete in labour and product markets by increasing the available talent pool (*e.g.* Ng and Burke 2004) and harnessing the 'feminine' skills and attributes of women in marketing to other women (*e.g.* Cunningham and Roberts 2007). Similarly, higher organisational performance has been linked to increases in the gender diversity of management boards (*e.g.* Singh *et al.* 2001; Welbourne 1999). Flexibility in employment practices is also argued to reduce costs in terms of reducing turnover and staff absence (*e.g.* Dex *et al.* 2001; Gray 2002).

The business case also has a macroeconomic dimension that views gender inequality in the labour market as a market failure or market 'rigidity'. From this perspective, gendered pay and productivity gaps are caused by that fact that women are concentrated in low paid occupations and this segregation is a form of labour market rigidity preventing the allocation of the most appropriate worker to any given job. Discrimination also prevents the most efficient allocation of workers to jobs that may depress women's productive potential if, for example, there is mismatch between women's skills and experience and the jobs they are doing. Similarly, interruptions to market work for caring activities and particularly part-time employment have a negative effect on women's productivity which in turn depresses their earning capacity (Walby and Olsen 2002).

The policy prescription from this analysis is therefore to 'correct' for market failures through increasing women's attachment to the labour market, *e.g.* making work more flexible, to increase their productivity, which increases GDP. For example, a key message of the report of the UK government's Women and Work Commission was that closing the pay and productivity gaps between men and women were estimated to be worth between 15 and 23 billion to the UK economy or between 1.3 and 2% of GDP (WWC 2006). The policy objective is clearly to increase the numbers of women in employment, leading to an increase in macroeconomic productivity as expressed in positive GDP growth. From a feminist economics perspective, this is a one-sided and inadequate policy response, stemming from the reliance on mainstream economics as a model for policy formulation. As the next section outlines, a feminist economics perspective is a broader and more appropriate paradigm in which to consider policy response to gender inequality in the labour market.

A Feminist Economics Perspective on the 'Business Case'

The business case has been critiqued by many authors (see for example Cassell 1997, Dickens 1994, 1999, 2006; Noon 2007). Methodologically it is difficult to show that gender equitable firms are more competitive than gender inequitable firms and at best the business case has been described as 'contingent' and 'partial' (Dickens 1999). Human resource arguments are only weakly convincing in tight labour markets and can be easily adapted to suit business aims which are not in line with equality such as discriminating against pregnant women.

The managerialist business case for gender equality is an interesting contrast with EO. Whereas the procedural conception of EO was seen to be incompatible with market efficiency because it was bureaucratic, the 'managing diversity' literature sees equality and efficiency as at the very least compatible, if not actively reinforcing. This approach is antithetical to mainstream welfare economics which views efficiency and equity as 'trade-offs'; [market] efficiency is of course prioritised within this particular gendered dualism. EO is also a discourse that is rooted in social justice – it is *just* to treat everyone fairly when making employment decisions and discriminating against individuals based on their gender (or age, or race or sexual orientation) is *unjust*. However, they are both based on an individualist conception of human behaviour where gender inequalities are the result of individual preferences and not structural inequalities. Individuals are in a sense 'neutered' because it is assumed that when sound equal opportunities policies are fully operational, gender should be pursued by treating men and women as 'the same'; a position that Nentwich (2006) calls 'liberal feminism'. Where EO had emphasised treating everyone as 'the same' now individuals are to be valued for their differences and women, as a group, are seen as bringing unique skills and attributes to the workplace by the very fact of their socialisation as women.

Crucially, this approach is attractive to employers because it offers a sanitised, politically unthreatening and market oriented approach to equality. For employers, if EO legislation had been the stick with which to ensure equality, promotion of the business case is the carrot (Dickens 1994). Furthermore, in the UK, policy levers for gender equality in employment in the private sector have been so eroded that the state is only able to try to *persuade* employers that they should take action on gender equality by appealing to their bottom line (*e.g.* Kingsmill 2001; WWC 2006, 2009). Attempts to ensure gender equality in the private sector have therefore moved from reliance on legislation that requires *reaction* to discrimination by individual employees to promotion of a business case for equality (as well as legislative 'fall back'). This business case is designed to encourage firms themselves to be *pro-active* in addressing gender inequalities in their own workforces by appealing to their own self-interest.

Promotion of the business case rests on the assumption that individual businesses will be motivated to take action on gender equality only if it is compatible with profit maximisation. The ethical/social justice dimension of gender equality remains the domain of government legislation invoking the body/soul dualism. Gender equality is presented as only important to the UK economy where it obstructs profit accumulation or is, to use the prevailing policy discourse, where it represents 'market failure'. The business case as it stands therefore tacitly *undermines* social justice arguments, leaving us with a pure 'economic' business case that can be easily adapted to justify actions that do not promote, or actively obstruct, equality. The market based argument is, as it currently stands, an inadequate policy instrument for addressing gender inequality in paid work as it does not recognise gender relations as a key variable. It could be improved by challenging the dualist assumption that private business is inherently devoid of ethical values and actively appealing to the ethical sensibilities of employers. Gender equality may or may not be good for business, depending on the industry in question or prevailing economic conditions, but it is always and for every industry and occupation, moral and just.

Furthermore, narrow, androcentric definitions of what constitutes 'the economic' and what does not also tacitly undermine gender equality by not recognising or valuing unpaid work and instead prioritising market based provision of human welfare and access to resources. For example, a feminist economics analysis of GDP as a measure of productive output shows that it does not include the economics activities that are performed in the absence of monetary exchange (Waring 1988). The underlying policy goal is therefore to increase market based work for pay, rather than valuing the *unpaid* work that GDP ignores. So from a narrow mainstream economic perspective, as measured by the conventional approach to national accounting, women as a group are not as productive as they could be. As Waring (2003) puts it "The United National System of National Accounts is still the most influential model being used invariably, but it is failing women miserably as a policy instrument" (Waring 2003: 42). However, if a feminist economics definition of work and economic activity to include the unpaid labour that is performed in the household, mainly by women, policy objectives may look different. Were measures of national output inclusive of unpaid labour, gender equality as a policy objective could be conceived as increasing the amount of unpaid work that is performed by men, at the same time as increasing paid work done by women, by recognising the true contributions made by both paid and unpaid labour to economic provisioning and household welfare. As the UNDP states:

> The monetization of the non-market work of women is more that a question of justice. It concerns the economic status of women in society. If women's unpaid work were properly valued, it is quite possible that women would emerge in most societies as the main breadwinner - or at least equal breadwinner – since they put in more hours of work than men (UNDP 1995: 98).

As attempts to increase women's employment in the market runs the risk of only increasing the numbers of women in low paid, segregated jobs, a broader definition of gender equality in the labour market is needed. This should be undertaken in conjunction with efforts to desegregate the labour market by encouraging men, as well as women, into jobs not traditionally associated with their gender.

Conclusion

From a feminist economics perspective, concerned as it is with improving the status of women in society and the economy, is the use of the business case as a means to reduce gender inequality in the labour market justified; do ends justify the means? This paper has attempted to answer this question drawing mainly on the work of Nelson (1996, 2006) and Waring (1988) to develop a feminist economics perspective on the business case and it is used in the UK labour market. In doing so the author has draw the following conclusion: It is argued that the answer could be yes under two conditions; the narrow, mainstream economic definitions of 'work' and 'economic activity' are be opened up to include the true value of unpaid work; and the assumption that firms are *only ever* self-interested and driven by profit can be relaxed. Only then the can business case arguments claim their rightful place *alongside* social justice/moral arguments for gender equality in the labour market. Policy discussions around gender equality should engage more with a feminist economics framework and not rely exclusively on mainstream explanations of gender inequalities which, by their very nature, rely on the *status quo* of gender relations. In order to achieve real equality between men and women in the labour market, policy makers should be accepting of a feminist economics framework which can break the ideological divide between efficient and ethical behaviour, as well as re-conceptualising the labour market to reflect the value of unpaid work done by women and their *actual* contribution to economic provisioning.

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